

Article

The Mirror: Advice on Presence and Awareness (*dran pa dang shes bzhin gyi gdams pa me long ma*)

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Received: 1 July 2013; in revised form: 26 August 2013 / Accepted: 6 September 2013 /

Published: 9 September 2013

Abstract: “The Mirror: Advice on the Presence of Awareness” (*dran pa dang shes bzhin gyi gdams pa me long ma*) is a short text that describes the essence of the Dzogchen teaching (*rdzogs chen*, total perfection). Concerning the way to establish this point of view (*lta ba*), the main point is to have a direct understanding through the experience of our primordial state of pure presence, beyond any mental or intellectual construction. With regard to meditation (*sgom pa*), this involves practicing in order to be sure to understand our own true nature, the non-dual condition of the calm state (the essence of the mind) and movement (its natural energy). Behavior (*spyod pa*) is the integration of meditation in all our daily activities, continuing in the state of pure presence in every circumstance of life. This is the total realization.

Keywords: Dzogchen; tantra; self-perfected state; samsara; state of enlightenment; karma; nirvana; mantra; state of pure non-dual presence; awareness

Those who practice Dzogchen must realize perfect presence and awareness and, to that end, must truly have understood their own mind and succeeded in gaining control of it. Otherwise, explanations about presence and awareness will not get results and will amount to little more than ink on paper or topics for intellectual discussion.

In the Dzogchen *tantra*, called *Kunjed Gyalpo* or *The All-creating King*¹, we read:

Mind² is the creator of all: *samsara* and *nirvana*:

¹ The *Kun byed rgyal po* is the most important of the twenty-one texts of the “nature of mind” series (*sems sde*) of Dzogchen. See [1].

² Here “mind” refers to the primordial state of mind.

Know this “all-creating king”!

Generally, it is explained that we transmigrate in the impure, illusory vision of *samsara*, but in reality, it is only our mind that transmigrates. Additionally, it is likewise only our mind that, purified, realizes the pure State of Enlightenment. The mind is, in truth, the sole base or root of all that is, of *samsara* and of *nirvana*, of sentient beings and of the enlightened ones.

How does transmigration in the impure vision of *samsara* begin? The nature of the mind, the essence of our own mind, is completely pure from the beginning, but due to adventitious obstacles caused by ignorance, we do not recognize our true State, which is pure non-dual presence. Without recognition of this State, our illusory thoughts, together with the impulses to act, caused by the passions, arise. In this way, we accumulate negative actions, and the result, since the maturation of *karma*³ is inevitable, is that we transmigrate in the six realms of samsaric existence⁴ with all the consequent suffering. Therefore, by not realizing that the cause of transmigration is our mind, we let ourselves be completely dominated by illusion and distraction, and not recognizing our State of pure non-dual presence inevitably, we get used to performing illusory acts.

The pure State of Enlightenment is our own mind, as well, not some sort of dazzling light coming from outside. If we recognize our primordial State of pure presence, pure from the beginning, albeit temporarily obscured, and we stay present in this recognition without getting distracted, then all impurities dissolve: this is the essence of the path. Now, the nature of the primordial State as total purity actually manifests, and recognizing it for what it is, we take hold of it forever. It is this decisive knowing, this pure presence of the true original condition, that is called *nirvana*. Enlightenment, too, therefore, is only our own mind, purified. That is why Padmasambhava said:

This mind has created both *samsara* and *nirvana*;
Outside of it neither the one nor the other exists.

Understanding the mind to be the root of both transmigration and Enlightenment, we can be certain that all the solidity of material phenomena and of sentient beings is merely the illusory vision of our own mind. Due to the varieties of accumulated *karma*, in fact, the various types of beings have distinct illusory visions, which are unreal in the same way that a person suffering from a “bile”⁵ disease sees a white conch shell as yellow in color. Accordingly, if representative beings from the six states of samsaric existence were to meet on the bank of a river, the six different species of *karma* would cause the river to appear differently to each of them. The “fire hell” being would see flames, the “ice hell” being would see ice, the hungry ghost or *preta* would see blood and pus, the water animal would see a home, the human would see drinking water, the demigod or *asura* would see weapons and the god or *deva* would see nectar. The obvious point is that in truth, there is no concrete, objective reality.

Therefore, once we have understood that only through our mind, which is the root of transmigration, can we uproot *samsara*, and likewise only through our mind, which is the essence of

³ *Karma* means the law of cause and effect that conditions the existence of the individual. Situations or circumstances we find ourselves in are not casual, but the result of certain past actions performed by us. Literally, *karma* means “action”.

⁴ The realms of the gods (*devas*), demigods (*asuras*), humans, animals, hungry ghosts (*pretas*) and hell beings. These states of samsaric existence are not eternal; rather, they manifest according to the kinds of acts performed during a life.

⁵ One of the three humors that can cause imbalance in the organism according to traditional Tibetan medicine; *mkhris pa* in Tibetan. The other two are air (*rlung*) and phlegm (*bad kan*).

Enlightenment—can we attain liberation—being certain that it alone is the basis of everything, we must resolutely decide to practice, which means working on our own mind.

This is the point at which we resolve to maintain continuous presence without distraction. If we want to stop a stream, we have to block it at its source, and automatically, its flow will cease; trying to block it at some point downstream would not achieve the same result. Likewise, if we want to uproot *samsara*, we must pull out the root in our own mind, which is the creator of it all: there is no other way of getting free of transmigration. This also holds for the purification of the obstacles and suffering caused by negative *karma*, because it is always our mind that is the sole cause. Conversely, if we perform any number of virtuous acts involving body and voice, no doubt, thereby, obtaining some temporary benefit, the karmic obstacles that we have failed to pull out at the root will soon begin to accumulate again. What we have done is comparable to pruning the leaves and branches of a tree instead of taking it out by the root, leaving it to regenerate instead of withering away.

If our mind, the “all-creating king”, is not in its authentic State, then, even if we apply the tantric methods of development and completion⁶ and recite countless *mantras*, we are not on the path of total liberation. One must overthrow the king to conquer the kingdom—it is hardly enough to subjugate some members of the court or a part of the populace. Likewise, if we do not know or resolve how to maintain presence without getting distracted, but instead, let ourselves get lost in distraction and illusion, we will never free ourselves from endless transmigration. On the other hand, if our mind does not get distracted and oblivious, but instead, manages to gain self-control and maintain the presence of its true State without being conditioned by illusion, it becomes the essence of all the teachings and the root of all the paths. In fact, all the phenomena of dualistic vision—*nirvana* and *samsara*, happiness and suffering, good and bad—arise solely from the mind and have no other origin. That is why it is said that a mind free of distraction is the basis of all paths and the deepest point of the practice.

The Buddhas of the past have attained Enlightenment, just as will those of the future, by following the path of continuous presence without distraction. Additionally, those attaining it at this time do so by grounding themselves in presence, because there is no other way of attaining Enlightenment. The recognition of our true State and the continuation of its presence really are the essence of all the paths, the basis of all meditation the conclusion of all practices, the pith of all the secret methods and the key to all the deepest teachings. This is why we have to try to maintain continuous presence without being distracted.

This means not hanging on to the past, not going after the future and, without letting ourselves get involved in the illusory thoughts arising in the present moment, turning inward and observing our own mind, leaving it in its true State beyond the limitations of past, present and future. Without letting ourselves be conditioned by contaminating conceptualization, without passing judgment on the State itself, whether indeed it even exists, whether it will turn out to be positive or negative, *etc.*, we must remain in this authentic condition and not try to correct it.

⁶ On the tantric path, two main methods are used: “development” (*bskyed rim*) and “completion” (*rdzogs rim*). Practice in the former method consists in the “creation”, through visualization, of the deity, a symbol of the primordial state, called *vidam*, and of the deity’s pure dimension, called *mandala*. In the latter method, the whole of the pure dimension that has been visualized is reabsorbed inside the *mandala* of the human body through concentration on the immaterial channels, where the energy circulates, called *nadis*, and on the centers, where this energy gathers, called *chakras*.

Although the primordial State of total perfection is completely beyond the limits of past, present and future, we are not immediately aware of this and, indeed, find difficulty in recognizing it when we first start to practice; so, it is important not to get distracted by thoughts of the “three times”. However, if in order not to let ourselves get distracted, we try to eliminate all thoughts, fixating on the idea of having to find a state of calm or of pleasure, it is essential to see that this is also a mistake, because such a fixation is itself nothing more than another thought.

Instead, we should let the mind become relaxed, maintaining only a clear presence of its natural condition, without getting distracted, forgetting or letting ourselves get wrapped up in our thoughts. When the mind is naturally relaxed and present, it comes to itself in its authentic State. If we do not manage to continue in this state and if various thoughts, good or bad, arise, then we should not immediately start questioning whether the mind is still in a calm state or whether the movement of thoughts has really arisen. Instead, maintaining presence and not getting distracted, we should just acknowledge the thoughts. The moment the thoughts are recognized, they relax into their own condition: all the time in which we have the presence of this recognition of thoughts, it is important not to get distracted. If the mind does get distracted and the thoughts are not acknowledged, we should resume attending to the presence of awareness.

If the thought arises concerning whether or not we are in a calm state, we should continue observing the state of the thought itself and simply not lose presence. If thoughts do not arise and the mind remains in a state of calm, we should continue with the presence of the recognition of the calm state. This means simply not getting distracted, maintaining the presence of this natural state without trying to define it, without hoping for the manifestation of a particular form, color or light, but instead, relaxing in it without being conditioned by impulses to enter into action instigated by thoughts.

When we are just beginning to practice, it is unlikely that our calm state will last more than an instant, but there is no need to start worrying, hoping it will last a long time or fearing its absence. The important point is just to keep presence without distraction, without getting caught up in dualistic considerations about a “state” to be observed or someone “here” to observe it.

If, despite maintaining presence, our mind does not remain in a calm state, but begins thinking about past or future actions or lets itself get captivated by sensory objects, like sounds or forms, we should not try to stop this “movement.” Indeed, even if we wanted to, we would scarcely succeed, because such movement is not something concrete: it is like the wind that eludes our grasp despite our best efforts. The point is not to regard the movement as a negative thing, as something to be rejected.

The truth here is that the calm state is the essence of the mind and movement is its energy: they are two inseparable aspects of the same reality, like the sea and its waves or the sun and its rays. If we consider the calm state something positive to be achieved and the movement of thoughts something negative to be abandoned, thereby cultivating the dualism of acceptance and rejection, then we will never overcome our ordinary mentality. Therefore, maintaining presence without distraction, we must simply acknowledge whatever thoughts arise—good or bad, relevant or insignificant—and just continue in the state of “movement”: this point is vitally important.

Further, on the issue of relating to movement, if, for some reason, when a thought arises, we do not manage to remain relaxed in presence, we must immediately try to recognize it without being distracted, because otherwise, that first thought can give rise to a whole chain of different thoughts. “Recognizing” does not mean that there is something to see with the eyes or to identify conceptually. It

means just being there with the presence of whatever thoughts occur, however they are linked to past, present or future, and of whatever sense objects arise. Through this actual presence, we “recognize” the state of movement and, then, simply continue without forgetting this recognition. It certainly does not consist in trying to interrupt the flow of movement or of trying to imprison the thoughts within, modifying or correcting the mind in some way.

Of course, at first, this unwavering recognition does not last for a long period of time, especially when we are just beginning to practice; we have, after all, become deeply accustomed to distraction and illusion throughout the endless time of our transmigration. Considering only our present lifetime, we can see that from the instant of birth, right up to the present moment, we have done little else than live in a distracted way, without training ourselves in the presence of awareness and in not being distracted. That is why, if we have not become aware of our own distraction, when out of negligence, we continuously get distracted or become forgetful, we must try in every way possible to recognize it through sheer presence of mind.

“To meditate” only means to maintain presence, both of the calm state and of movement: there is nothing on which to meditate. There is nothing higher or clearer to seek beyond the recognition and continuation of our State of pure non-dual presence. If, instead of continuing in our own State, we turn outward, hoping something will manifest, we are like the man in the Tibetan saying who, when an evil spirit showed up at his eastern gate, sent the ritual ransom to the western gate to buy it off. In such a case, even if we think we are meditating perfectly, this “meditation” will only be a way of tiring ourselves out to no avail. Continuing in the State of pure presence found only within one’s self is what really matters.

Neglecting our actual possessions, while looking for something that we believe is missing, we become like the pauper in the Buddhist parable who failed to notice that his pillow was a precious stone and wore himself out begging. Therefore, doing whatever we can to maintain the State of pure non-dual presence, while observing each movement of thought as it arises, refraining from judging how clear this presence is or from accepting the calm state or rejecting movement, we must apply the essence of the practice. This consists in continuing in our own State without distraction and forgetfulness, not at all conditioned by the desire to modify anything.

Some people get disturbed or annoyed by noises made by others walking or talking; or their attention distracted by external things, they let themselves get involved in endless ordinary illusions. This defect is called “the difficult passage when vision appears as an enemy” and shows that even though we know how to continue knowing the calm state and the movement of thoughts, we have not succeeded in applying presence to sense perceptions. Therefore, our practice has not been integrated with external vision. In this case, while continuing to maintain presence, at the moment of perceiving any particular form, we should not yield to distraction, but, without judging whether it is beautiful or ugly, simply remain relaxed while recognizing it. If a thought arises that does judge it as beautiful or ugly, we should continue to remain present in the recognition of that thought, without forgetting.

Similarly, if we find ourselves in disturbing circumstances, such as being in the midst of a lot of noise, we should recognize it for what it is and continue with the presence of the state of that thought without getting distracted. If a thought of compelling aversion arises, we recognize it, and without losing control and being dominated by the surge of passions, we remain present in the state of that

thought. This approach works with sense objects generally—sounds, smells, *etc.* In every case, the point is to remain with the presence of the actual recognition of whatever we perceive.

Without the capacity to integrate presence with all our daily activities, such as eating, walking, sleeping and sitting, there is no way to extend the state of meditation beyond the limited time of a single session of practice, and until we have stable presence, there will always be a separation between meditation sessions and daily activities. For this reason, it is very important to try to maintain presence as much as possible, integrating it with all our activities, just as the Buddha explained in the *Sutra of Wisdom Beyond The Intellect (Prajñāparamitasutra)*:

Subhuti! In what way can a *bodhisattva-mahasattva*⁷, recognizing that he has a body, apply perfect conduct? Subhuti! If a *bodhisattva-mahasattva* walks, he is completely aware of walking; if he stands, he is completely aware of standing; if he sits, he is completely aware of sitting; if he lies down, he is completely aware of lying down; if his body is well or ill, he is completely aware of it.

In order to understand how we might integrate presence with all daily activities, let us take the example of walking. The moment the impulse to walk comes up, there is no need to stand up suddenly and walk in an inattentive, agitated way, running the risk of breaking anything in our path. Rather, we should walk bearing in mind, “Now I’m getting up, and while I’m walking, I don’t want to get distracted.” In this way, without letting ourselves get distracted, we are aware that we are walking, and step by step, we begin to gain control of ourselves through the presence of awareness.

Similarly, if we are sitting down, we should be aware of it, and the same with whatever we are doing, whether it is having a bite to eat or sipping a drink or saying a couple of words. No matter whether or not what we are doing is particularly important, we must always maintain presence without getting distracted.

Since we are so strongly accustomed to distraction, it is difficult to give rise to real presence of awareness, especially when we are just beginning to practice. Yet, this is much the same sort of difficulty we encounter when starting a new job. In the first phase of basic training, we may get hardly anything right, but after a while, through experience, the job gets easier. Here, we work in the same way: we start by engaging, taking special care not to get distracted, following up with the resolve to maintain presence to the utmost degree possible; and when each new sign of distraction appears, we activate the capacity to recognize it. Continuing in this way, committed to the presence of awareness, we can, in fact, get to the point where we are no longer subject to distraction at all.

In general, in Dzogchen, the teaching of the State of spontaneous self-perfection, the fundamental principle pertaining to “view, meditation, conduct and the final fruit” is self-liberation. This must, in all instances, arise through presence and awareness, most particularly as regards the aspect of conduct. Until we precisely apply the principle of self-liberation in the conduct of our life, there is no way to bridge the gap between a formal meditation session and daily activity.

When we speak of the principle of the “self-liberation of conduct” as being the essence of all the *tantras*, *lungs* and “secret instructions”⁸ in the teachings of Dzogchen, young people today seem to

⁷ A being who devotes his or her life totally to the commitment to gain Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

⁸ The Dzogchen scriptures are classified in three basic types: *tantras*, *lungs* and “secret instructions.” The *tantras* are revealed texts that contain complete explanations of the base, way and fruit of Dzogchen. The *lungs* are summaries or

respond very favorably. Some of them, however, do not grasp that the basis of this self-liberation is true presence and awareness; still others, in spite of having enough theoretical understanding to think about it intelligently and discuss it, nevertheless suffer the shortcoming of not actually applying it. This brings to mind the case of someone who is ill and not able to recover his health, because, even though he knows all about the properties and function of a given medicine and may even be quite expert in explaining what it does, still does not take it himself. In a related sense, we all have long been afflicted by a grave condition, namely, the illness of a dualistic mentality, the only remedy for which is direct knowledge of the State of self-liberation, beyond all limitations and sectarianism.

When we are meditating, continuing in the State of pure non-dual presence, there is no need to give special attention to the aspect of conduct. Yet, for a person who is just beginning to practice, there is no way to enter into the real meaning of the practice, other than by alternating meditation sessions with daily activities. This is because, based on our habits of rational thinking and the way we conceive our “reality”, we have very strong attachment to the objects of sense perception and, most particularly, to our flesh-and-blood physical body. When we meditate on “not I,” mentally eliminating the head and limbs one by one, we can easily establish that there is no “I”⁹. However, this “not I” is only a concept, the fruit of our intellectual analysis, and not real knowledge of the state of “not I.” If, while saying there is no I, a thorn gets stuck in our foot, of course we immediately cry out, “Ouch!” This proves that we are still slaves to the dualistic condition and that the “not I” we are so clever in talking about has not become a truly lived state. This is why it is indispensable that we take care to have presence and awareness, the basis of the self-liberation of conduct in all daily activities following meditation sessions.

Because there have been different ways of ascribing importance to the aspect of conduct, various kinds of laws have been made based on external conditions, such as religious rules and judicial systems. However, as for the way we observe them, there is, in principle, a big difference between respecting a law through awareness and doing so through compulsion. Generally, since everybody is conditioned by *karma*, by the passions and dualism, very few people respect laws on the basis of awareness. This is why, even though no one wants to, everyone has had to submit to the power of different kinds of laws.

We are already conditioned by *karma*, by the passions and by dualism, so that if we add to this conditioning the limitations derived from having to obey laws under compulsion, not only do we make our burden even heavier, we also get further away from the fundamental principles of the “view” and “conduct”. This helps us see the urgency for anyone who has experienced real inner knowledge of the practice to let presence and awareness arise precisely within oneself—the key to the self-liberation of conduct.

The self-liberation of conduct must not be understood as meaning that we can do whatever we like: that is absolutely not its principle. Understanding it in that way clearly shows that one has not understood the meaning of awareness.

collections of quotes from one or more *tantras*, particularly from those that do not exist on Earth. Finally, the secret instructions (upadeshas) are teachings tied to the particular experiences of various masters.

⁹ According to one type of meditation, which is very widespread in the Sutra tradition, if we try to identify our “I” with our body, then mentally eliminate our head, arms, legs, *etc.*, we come to realize that what we generally consider to be our “I” cannot be identified with our body, neither as a whole, nor with any of its parts.

At the base, we must distinguish clearly between the principle of law and that of awareness. Laws are established according to the circumstances of time and place, and they condition the individual from the outside, whereas awareness arises from knowledge that the individual possesses. That is why laws sometimes correspond to an individual's awareness and sometimes, they do not. However, if we have awareness, we can overcome the attitude that we have to obey laws out of compulsion. Moreover, someone who has awareness and has stabilized its presence will be able to live untroubled under any kind of law in the world, without being conditioned by it.

Many important masters have said:

Spur on the horse of awareness with the whip of presence!

If awareness is not aroused by presence, in fact, it cannot function. Here is an example of what is meant by "awareness". Say a normal adult woman has a cup full of poison in front of her and is aware of it. Since she knows what the danger of the poison is, she does not need a lot of explanation about it. She will warn those who do not know about the danger, saying, "There's poison in that cup—if you drink it, you'll die!" In this way, awareness has a chance of arising in others too, and people can try to avoid the danger.

Now suppose we are dealing with people who know about the danger of the poison, but do not consider it important or still have doubts about it or who actually do not have this awareness. Then, it is not enough merely to say, "This is poison!" It will be necessary to add, "Drinking this is forbidden, and anyone who disobeys will be punished by law!" This is the sense in which life is protected through the threat of the law. Law indeed is based on this principle, and, although it is very different from the principle of awareness, it is indispensable in order to help save the lives of irresponsible people, who lack awareness.

Extending the above example, we can go further in understanding the meaning of "presence". Assuming that someone with a cup full of poison in front of her is aware of it and knows full well the consequences of drinking it, yet lacks continuous presence and, therefore, allows herself to get distracted; the unfortunate result may be that she accidentally drinks the poison. The point is that if awareness is not accompanied by presence, it is difficult for it to produce the right results.

The principle that Mahayana practitioners in general talk about, treating it a bit like an axiom, is the "union of emptiness and compassion". However, without the awareness that is inseparable from presence, authentic compassion cannot arise. It is useless to pretend to be among the so-called compassionate if we do not actually feel compassion towards others. As the Tibetan proverb says:

We've got eyes with which to see each other, but we need a mirror to see ourselves!

In order to give rise to true compassion within us, we have to observe our own shortcomings and be fully aware of them; and indeed, in order to discover what the condition of other people is, we have to put ourselves in another's place. This is exactly what only genuine presence of awareness can accomplish. Otherwise, for all our display of having great compassion, sooner or later, a situation will arise that will show us that it has never really arisen in us.

Until pure compassion arises, there is no way to overcome limitations and sectarianism. However, there are many practitioners who reach a point after a while where they consider themselves like deities and treat others as opposing evil spirits, thereby strengthening their limitations and further

accentuating attachment and hatred. Though they talk a lot about Mahamudra¹⁰ and Dzogchen, at the level of behavior, they are only becoming more expert and refined in acting according to the “eight worldly concerns”¹¹. This is a concrete sign that genuine compassion has not arisen and that, at the most fundamental level, the true and only root of compassion, the presence of awareness, has never arisen.

We want to avoid joining those who only chatter about practice or who are satisfied with donning a certain elegant appearance. Therefore, by taking to heart the profound need to give rise to actual presence and awareness within ourselves, we can put them into action in the most direct and concrete way. This is the vitally important practice of the Dzogchen teachings.

Acknowledgements

Adriano Clemente who translated my original text from Tibetan, adding notes. Shang Shung Editions (Arcidosso, Italy) for publishing both the English translation and the original of my Tibetan text: *The Mirror: Advice on Presence and Awareness*. Arcidosso: Shang Shung Publications, 1983, and for the authorization to publish part of it. Paolo Roberti di Sarsina for his project and wholehearted efforts of the Special Issue dedicated to *Dzogchen* and for editing my text. Fabio Maria Risolo for assisting the project. Paolo Roberti di Sarsina, Alfredo Colitto and Fabio Maria Risolo for their two articles portraying my lineage and my legacy.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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¹⁰ Mahamudra, the ultimate goal of the transformation practices of the Anuttara Tantra of the modern tradition, is the non-dual state of total integration of pure vision with the impure dimension of samsara. Literally, Mahamudra means “great (or total) symbol”.

¹¹ The eight worldly concerns (*'jig rten chos brgyad*) are gain and loss, fame and disrepute, praise and blame, pleasure and pain.

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